

THE DHOW SAILOR

197

the cargo the dhow had hauled was figured and the cost of the food consumed by the officers and crew was deducted, giving the net earning of the dhow. One-half belonged to the crew and was divided into forty-seven and one-half shares as shown above. The other half belonged to the owner, and represented his return on his investment; the owner had to maintain the dhows from his half of the earnings. As we saw above in the case of the figures presented by Villiers, the owner has little to deduct from his share of the ship's earnings, so his return on his investment is considerable. It is little wonder that Mr. A. Bease was recently able to give Oxford University a contribution of £2,000,000!

Over one hundred years ago, the French Admiral F. E. Paris spent considerable time in the waters around Muscat and wondered how Arab ships could at that time compete with the more efficient European sailing ships. Paris summed up his conclusions as follows:

... les Arabes qui les montent habitués au retour périodique des moussons, n'exténuent, en général, qu'un voyage par an ... [ils] entendent bien le commerce; malgré cela, ils sont rarement employés par les Européens ... et, comme ils ne prennent que de très-faibles cargaisons, ce n'est que grâce à l'extrême économie des Arabes qu'ils peuvent servir pour le commerce.⁴²

Only a decade ago, one hundred years after Paris, men of other lands were still wondering how an Arab sailing fleet could possibly survive in the present era of oil and steam; to satisfy his curiosity Alan Villiers dedicated a year of his life to sailing with the Arabs in their dhows. Villiers has summed up the reasons for the survival of the dhow fleet as follows:

One reason—perhaps the chief—why the ancient trade with the monsoons down the Indian Ocean not only survives but flourishes is that the dhows warehouse the goods they carry as well as transport them, and it suits the merchants better to have 10,000 packages of new season's dates divided among a fleet of dhows, than in the hold of one steamer which will unload the lot in a day or two, and flood the market. Ten thousand packages provide cargoes for at least five large dhows; the dhow master does not care how long he takes to discharge his cargo, for his overheads are trifling, his crew works on shares and handles all cargo, and his vessel pays practically no port dues.⁴³

While in Aden in 1950, the writer investigated the intriguing problem of dhow economics, as applied to the coastal craft operating around

⁴² F. E. Paris, *Essai sur la Construction Navale des Peuples Extra-Européens* (Paris, Bertrand, [1841]), p. 9. "... the Arabs who man them, accustomed to the periodic reversal of the monsoons, carry out, in general only one voyage a year ... they understand commerce well; in spite of that, they are rarely employed by Europeans ... and, as they carry only very poor cargoes, it is only because of the extreme economy of the Arabs that they can be of use for commerce."

⁴³ A. Villiers, 'The Arab Dhow Trade,' *Middle East Journal*, II (1948), 400-401.

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505 craft on the west coast of India engaged in coastal trade over the one thousand-mile coastline. These vessels averaged only about forty tons and carried on the average eight-man crews. It is extremely interesting to note that Vaidya²⁸ concluded that these vessels never made voyages to ports over four hundred to five hundred miles away, always staying within a five hundred-mile radius of their home ports. The only vessels that made longer trips were the larger craft from the Gulf of Cutch and the Sind coast, these craft carrying Indian trade to Africa, Arabia, and the Persian Gulf. Thus in India the same economic balance that is found in the Gulf of Aden governs the coastal trade. These coastal craft would rather return home in ballast than travel out of their arbitrary 'zone' for a cargo.

479 Admiral Paris thought that the dhows could exist in the face of more
465 efficient European sailing ships only because of the extreme economy of
505 the Arabs. Villiers thought that the main reason the deepwater dhow could still exist in large numbers in the present day of steam was in the main because of the date-storehousing ability of the dhow, which did not tend to flood the market with dates. However, as we have seen above, the 1949 crop of dates entered Aden under steam, rather than on Kuwait dhows.

No, the answer to the question is of a more fundamental nature than either Paris' or Villiers' reason. It is this writer's opinion that the main and only reason why deepwater dhows can survive in this day and age is the system of sailors' wages—the 'debt system.' The Arab capitalists' philosophy is 'Get a man in debt and then never pay him enough to get out of debt.' Certainly this is true about the deepwater Arab craft that sail from the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman to Africa; the crews are paid once a year, so that by the time they do receive their pay the advances made to them usually consume most of their wage. This would tend to be less true if the sailors were paid more frequently. It is interesting to note that A. Besse operates his coastal dhows under the debt system and shares, paying off only once a month and giving out liberal advances in between to keep the sailors in debt.

However, this is not the most important factor keeping the large number of coastal craft operating in areas like the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and the west coast of India. These coastal craft provide a very valuable service by moving cargo in small amounts to ports not usually visited by steamers; steamers find it uneconomical to make short hauls of small cargoes. However, what may be considered a small cargo for a steamer may fill several dhows. In many instances these coastal craft furnish the only transportation to many small off-the-shore ports.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 103.